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WORDS OF PEACE.

YOU know, brethren, that I have long felt an interest in your congregational affairs. By occasional intercourse, our acquaintance has grown into friendship ; and till this time, I have been always glad to meet you in the house of God, to join with you in acts of devotion, and to assist your preparation for the eternal state. When at a distance, also, your condition afforded me many pleasing reflections. I had seen you surmount those difficulties which new congregations usually experience ; and, by encrease of numbers, you seemed to have acquired a stability, which promised much good to yourselves and to the church at large. From these considerations I cherished a hope, that your comfort in the gospel would be proportioned to your exertions to secure its ordinances ; and, that, having one father of all and one common inheritance, you would live like brethren, and love like the children of God. Unfortunately for you all, however, you have let wild grapes grow where the grape should flourish ; and instead of the unity of the spirit, there are divisions among you.

THIS is not very honourable to a christian profession ; and, I dare say, you are able to add, that it has afforded you neither the profit nor pleasure of religious improvement. It must then be advisable to cease from contention ; and it oc-

ours to me, that, if you would only be as candid and reasonable as I have formerly found you, this end might be very easily gained. I do not insinuate that any of you wish to be unreasonable. But you must have often observed, that persons engaged in dispute, do not always approve their own conduct, when calm reflection returns. Keenness of debate will, at times, make even reasonable and religious men overlook points of importance which should be considered with care. Allow me, therefore, to suggest to you a few remarks, which persons in your situation might usefully weigh ; and let me entreat you to hear them with christian affection. I can have no wish to displease any of you : but truth is the foundation of peace ; and I do wish to tell you the truth. May you all receive it, as the truth ought to be received. All feel its influence, and again walk in unity and peace of the gospel.

I do not say that disputes should never exist in the church. It is possible for even the peace of the church to be too dearly purchased. Of this you are aware, however, that, among the friends of religion, they are always unseemly. The contention of christians is so utterly repugnant to a religious profession, and so completely opposite to the design of the gospel, that very few causes can authorize its introduction into the church. Besides, upon the subject of peace, the injunctions of Christ are so plain and explicit ; that he who interrupts the harmony of the church, ought to be well assured of the validity of his reasons. With much fervent prayer and meditation, he should bring the point of debate to the test of scripture ; and before he proceed, the trial should leave upon his mind an impression, that his conduct will receive the approbation of Christ. Be sure, brethren, that you can contemplate with confidence, an appearance before him who shall judge the quick and the dead ;

and, that your present deportment will be applauded on that day in which every man's work will be tried by fire.

BUT the disputes of christians are not merely unbecoming ; they are really injurious. Wherever there is strife in the church, there must be disregard of divine authority, and dishonour done to the gospel of peace. Besides, it destroys the communion of christians, and interrupts the progress of religion in the world. When dissension occurs, it must then be an enquiry of prudence, will the gain of quarrelling counterbalance the loss ? and this point properly weighed, would often, I believe, suggest the propriety of leaving off strife before it be meddled with, and prove an excellent preservative of congregational peace. The price is great ; the purchase ought to be valuable. If it do not tend to the honour of God and the prosperity of the church, to unite more closely the friends of religion, to promote godliness and recommend it to the world ; certainly it ought not to disquiet, and much less to divide, those who are living in the peaceful fellowship of the gospel.

It may be observed to you farther, that persons disputing ought to be very jealous of their own judgment respecting the subject of debate. That strife which will receive the approbation of the God of peace, must be supported by very weighty reasons indeed ; and let us all remember, that his decisions do not always accord with the views of those who are quarrelling. What such persons conceive to be of vast importance, God may very lightly esteem. Offences sink deep into the human mind, and the oftener they are considered they encrease in magnitude ; till at last the mind, absorbed by its feelings, mistakes the greatness of its uneasiness, for the ground of its offence.

BUT this is not the only mistake. In proportion to the uneasiness of the mind, those things

which are really important, are frequently overlooked. A time of contention, above all others, requires the exercise of a sound judgment; yet, that is the very period in which the calm dictates of reason are least regarded; in which the mind is most apt to be deceived. With much purity of intention, there may be much incorrect reasoning, both respecting, the subject of debate and its consequences; and therefore, when we begin to dispute, we ought to recollect that the feelings of nature may deceive and mislead us. Let us think a great deal about christian charity. This will give to our judgment a just direction; and then offences will have less influence, and be more easily removed.

LET us think a great deal about christian charity. The influence of disputes upon the dispositions of men, makes this vastly important. Yielding is at no time a leading quality of human nature, and least of all during a period of contention. The mere feelings of the mind are then mistaken for injury; and in proportion as persons conceive themselves to be injured, they are prone to be obstinate. Such a disposition savours rather of vengeance, than of the mercy of the gospel. Religion says, *Do good to those who despitefully use you*; and ought not offences to be met by a merciful and yielding mind? When our Lord was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not: He committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. This is example worthy of imitation.

BESIDES, it may be remarked, that obstinacy produces very dangerous fruit. Where that is indulged, the most upright intentions will degenerate into eagerness to secure a victory; and a mind determined upon this point, becomes not very scrupulous about the means of gaining it. Certainly, then, in disputing we ought to beware, lest our zeal for religion terminate in the mere purpose of pleasing ourselves: *It is good to be zealously affected always*

in a good thing. But if a man strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, unless he strive lawfully.

AGAIN it may be observed, that persons disputing cannot easily do justice to each others intentions. The irritation arising from strife, is unfriendly to candour. Believing ourselves right, we are naturally disposed to cast the blame upon others ; and the stronger their opposition, we are the less willing to admit the purity of their views. This, I apprehend, is usually a principal cause of the continuation of quarrels. Candour always lessens opposition, because it sees less to oppose ; and even when disputes arise, between candid minds they are very easily settled. *Charity covers a multitude of sins ; it overlooks a great many faults. Charity suffereth long and is kind, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.* For ourselves we are willing to make a large allowance ; surely, our neighbour should have also a share. *Bear ye one another's burden, and so fulfil the law of Christ.* This is true christianity ; and happy is that church which strives with such deeds of affection. Peace and prosperity will dwell there : its walls shall be salvation and its gates, praise.

CONSIDER also, how contention affects social intercourse and christian communion. When disputes arise, there is certainly much need of friendly intercourse and candid discussion. These, as means for restoring harmony, are seldom used without excellent effect. Confidence is repaid with confidence ; and, in friendly intercourse, each party perceives more to admire, and less to displease. Grounds of offence generally diminish, in proportion to the friendship and candour with which they are discussed. Yet, these are the very means, which persons at variance most carefully avoid. Concluding that he who opposes us, must be our enemy, we conceive him to be as bad as suspicion suggests ; and

then we overlook his good qualities and his good actions together : We withdraw from him our friendship ; we account him unworthy of regard ; we will not allow him even those marks of civility which we would give to a stranger. You must have also observed, that, of all disputes, those which arise in the church, are the most inveterate ; as if the animosity of christians ought to be proportioned to their former harmony. How unseemly is this, and how utterly repugnant to christian principles ! If reason and moderation exist in the world, they should be found among christians. Good men expect to be companions forever : surely, it becomes them now, to cultivate communion ; to vie with each other, in looks, and words, and offices of kindness.

I do not doubt, brethren, that you all wish to display a conduct, worthy of yourselves. But here is the danger of quarrelling : in contention, we overlook our true character ; and, in eagerness to play the man, we forget the christian. In all disputes, therefore, it would serve an excellent purpose, did we recollect the nature and design of a christian profession, consider the obligations of religion, and then examine if our conduct be worthy of the christian calling. Allow me, brethren, to bring you to this test. It is evident that there is something wrong among you : this may help to discover it ; and I think, that, with your usual candour, if you could only perceive your mistake, you would readily disapprove and rectify it.

You are aware that a principal design of the christian profession, is the honour of God. You know that he is worthy to be praised ; and, perhaps, it would be doing you injustice to say, that any of you have other objects in view. I doubt, however, that you have not chosen the best method of showing forth the honour of his name. Nothing can reflect honour upon the deity, which does not accord with his character, and display submission to his

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will and an imitation of his example : And, doubtless, the contention of christians is neither the will of God, nor according to the example of Christ. To illustrate to you the character and will of the deity, would be a mere repetition of those things, which have been often laid before you in the house of God. Permit me only to remark, that love and peace are the substance of the whole ; love and peace proceeding from the grace of God ; love and peace to be exemplified in us, to the honour of his name. He is the God of peace ; and we should be his followers ; walking in love, as Christ also loved us. If, then, there be no love, no peace in the church ; what glory can God receive ? He may glorify his justice, by sweeping such a church from the congregations of his people ; but the glorious excellence of his grace must remain unknown.

DOUBTLESS, you wish, brethren, to reverence the authority of God ; to be living proofs of the healing power of his grace ; and, as the best pattern of honouring him, to resemble Christ. Does God command quarrelling ? Does his grace set every man against his brother ? Did Christ strive with his friends ? He loved his enemies, he loved them even to the death, he died praying for their forgiveness. How repugnant to this, is the contention of christians ! It is just as dishonouring to God, as the broils of brethren are to the father of a family. The highest glory to God is the peace of his church. Contention, then, must be the very worst offering that we can present before him ; and should we bring it into his presence, it will overwhelm us with confusion. If we love Christ, we must not disregard the peace and prosperity of his church. Affection for the brethren, should prove the sincerity of our love to God : And blessed is that servant whom his lord, when he cometh, shall find preserving the peace of his household, and walking in love.

WALKING in love ; this is the true fellowship

of the gospel, and an important end of the christian vocation. It is not good for man to be alone : the Lord, therefore, setteth the solitary in families ; and this arrangement he has introduced into religion. To save every man by himself, would be easy for God. But man assists man to sin ; and man is ordained to aid man, in the service of God and in the attainment of happiness. Good men have one father of all and one common inheritance, the same wilderness to tread and the same common afflictions. God, therefore, brings them together, that they may know each other and each others wants ; that they may experience the feelings, and afford the assistance of brethren. This is honourable to the divine benevolence, and experience has proved it to be profitable to the Church. Christian communion is incalculable gain. Religion in secret is sweet ; but a day in the family of God, is better than a thousand. Unfortunately for you all, however, in proceeding through the wilderness, you have fallen out by the way. I say unfortunately ; for, were the truth told, it has fared with you accordingly. Contention kills the benevolent feelings of the mind ; and even christians at variance, instead of cherishing the fellowship of the gospel, will exert themselves to make one another stumble and fall. Once, you enjoyed communion in the house of God ; now, you have not the same mutual affection and confidence. Ask yourselves, then, which way is best ; which, most glorifying to God, honourable to the gospel of his grace, and profitable to the interests of religion in the church. Doubtless, you will all say, that it is not with you as in months past ; that your disputes have destroyed christian helpfulness and the comfort of christian communion ; and, that the church had never less appearance of religious improvement.

NONE of you, brethren, can, in present circumstances, make that progress in godliness which be-

comes your profession. If you were growing in religion, you would be living in the bonds of affection. I will venture to affirm, that, if any improvement be made, it is by those individuals who have not interfered with your disputes at all ; who are now grieving in secret, that your strife has risen above the gospel of peace. Warned by your contention, these may be learning humility ; but still their progress is marked by depression. They want those cheering sensations, which the mutual affection of christians excites. Intercourse with you affords no fellowship of brotherly love : it is a communication with minds brooding on strife ; and when you say to them, *Let us go up into the house of the Lord*, the prospect can give them no gladness of heart. Religion can never flourish in a church, when its members are a prey to contention. They are themselves neglecting the means of reconciliation and peace ; and how can the God of peace give them his presence and blessing from on high ? Did you only consider your present situation ; you would easily perceive, you would all feel, how pernicious to improvement in personal religion your contention is, how injurious to the exercise of every christian grace. You may have a consciousness that you are acting uprightly ; but you have not the peaceful satisfaction of feeling that you love the whole family of God, and are beloved in return. Besides, a mind brooding on strife, has within itself, what enfeebles every spring of activity in a religious life. Its unfriendly dispositions pervade its most solemn acts of devotion. Even its professions of love are mingled with prejudice and dislike ; and how can it, in such a state, receive instruction in righteousness ? It will not submit to those precepts, which enjoin the exercise of christian affection toward its keenest opposers.

BESIDES, it may be remarked, that your pre-

present condition is not without its influence upon the general interests of religion. You know it to be your duty, to adorn the gospel for the sake of others. Religion enjoins you to exemplify its love and peace, that the church may be edified; and also, that those who are strangers to godliness, contemplating its excellence in you, *may glorify God in the day of visitation*. In your situation likewise, there is something peculiar, which ought not to be overlooked. The existence of this congregation was conceived to be important to the general interests of the presbyterian church. We looked to you as a society of christians, with whom the members of our congregations, occasionally resorting to this place, could associate in acts of devotion, according to the doctrine and order, maintained in the church at large. We expected also, that your christian deportment would gain to the church, many who might be unacquainted with the doctrine which we preach. For these purposes, you became a congregation, received a minister of the gospel, and have had all the ordinances of religion dispensed among you; and what are the consequences? There is scarcely a congregation of the presbyterian church, in which your dissension is not known and deplored; and you must all be satisfied, that you are giving to the world, an ill recommendation of those principles which we profess to maintain.

BUT overlooking, in the mean time, all these things; let me ask you, brethren, what you can promise yourselves from your present disputes. Pleasure they can give you none, and profit as little; and surely, if you consider their future effects, you can have no wish that they should be for a moment prolonged. If you do not sacrifice something for the peace of the church, separation must ensue; and I doubt if you will even then enjoy more real satisfaction of mind. Then, you will

have time to reflect ; and, when calm reflection returns, those things which would please you now, may prove to you a source of very painful sensations. You are not aware of the multiplicity of those cheerless reflections, which such an event must unavoidably produce. The protracted contention of a church inflicts many wounds, which you have yet to feel. Did you behold solitude in the house of God, his children dispersed in the world, and the enemies of religion, by your means, confirmed in their prejudices ; the meditations of your solitary moments, would not be the same as to day. *Glory to God in the highest ; on earth peace, good will toward men*, would not be your song, in the house of your pilgrimage. Do not persuade yourselves that these events may occur, without impairing your own peace of mind. The mere consciousness of your part in this contention, must have a saddening effect upon your religious enjoyments ; and what will you feel, when God deals with you, as a father deals with his undutiful children ? His paternal love may preserve you from destruction ; but it will save you so as by fire : and, should you ever experience the corrections of mercy, you will feel them to be heavier, than you are well able to bear.

BUT, granting that none of the adversities of life should ever assail you ; (and may you brethren, always enjoy the loving kindness of the Lord, and always rejoice in the light of his countenance ;) yet, though you should live *an hundred years and rejoice in them all* ; there are days of darkness to be encountered, when even the voice of rejoicing begets sadness of heart. No prosperity can arrest the progress of that period, in which even the strong men bow themselves and descend into the grave. It is easy to conceive, what you would wish your latter end to be. You would wish it to be cheered with the consolations of mercy ; to possess the

evidence of an interest in the loving kindness of the Lord ; to die with a well grounded assurance, that you are going where the Saviour is, and where there is fulness of joy forever. But is there no danger, that your conduct now may cloud the evidences of all these things, at the very time when you have the greatest need of them ? You are now striving together ; will you be then able to say, *I have fought the good fight* ? May not God withhold from you the light of his countenance, and permit the darkness of death to compass you about ? You will find dying sufficiently hard, without the fruits of contention to increase its sorrows : And let me say to you, brethren, that a contentious spirit is the very worst evidence of an entrance into the heavenly Canaan : those who strove in the wilderness, perished by the way.

It would be well for you all, to surmount the irritation of strife ; and, with respect to your present disputes, to realize those views and feelings, which may attend your entrance into the gates of the grave : and do not contemplate this as a far distant event. Death steals upon men as a thief in the night ; and this we know, that a time of quarrelling in the family of Christ, is the very period in which he comes to set his house in order : *The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him asunder*,—may he find you better employed, and reward you with the portion of faithful servants.

The lord of that servant shall come : This event is of vast importance to us all. To die is little : it is only a separation from earthly things. But there is after it the judgment ; and there every man's works will be tried, and every man, rewarded according to his works. Now, there is only one way, in which we can have confidence in the presence of Christ ; and the boldest of those who re-

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ject it, will be appalled with terror, when they appear before him : *They shall say to the mountains, fall on us ; and to the hills, cover us.* Are you, brethren, in a state of preparation for the judgment seat of Christ ? The season is drawing nigh, *in which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat ;* and then the Son of man shall appear, *coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.* Have you embraced the gospel of peace ? Have you been *diligent that you may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless ?* Where are those talents which you have gained for Christ ? When the judgment is set and the books are opened, will they contain a detail of your love to the brethren ? To you he has entrusted the peace of his church ; and what have you done with it ? There is peace in the gospel ; but among you there is none : you profess to be the children of peace, and you have filled the church with unseemly strife.

BRETHREN, there is something among you which cannot abide the day of Christ's coming ; and now is the time to have the evil rectified. Let me, therefore, entreat you to review your present dispositions and conduct ; and, when you take each his own share of the blame, make that allowance for others, which the imperfection of human nature needs. None of you could wilfully destroy the peace of the church. You must have mistaken each other's views and intentions ; and I think, that, if you could only be induced to entertain this opinion, harmony might be easily restored. A mind dwelling upon faults and grievances, is always uncomfortable and always quarrelsome. Think, brethren, upon those good qualities which you have seen in each other, before your contention commenced. This is an important step to reconciliation ; and, certainly, it is a step which no religious man should refuse to take. You may still imagine that you

have cause to be displeased; but, with a sincere desire to be reconciled, grounds of offence upon all sides, will be greatly diminished. Our Lord met with offences, and repaid them with kindness. You conceive yourselves injured, and think it many to resent; but you see, it is godlike, it is glorious, to forgive. Show, then, that grace can triumph over the feelings of nature; when others pursue vengeance, be ye the followers of God. Christian forgiveness can make no man mean or despised. It gives grace and dignity to the christian character: And who would compare the gratification of revenge, to the sweet sensations of a forgiving mind? One hour of such conscious reflection, exceeds the gains of an eternity of strife. When life draws nigh to the grave, you would wish to have these feelings; you would wish your worst enemies to have the same. You would earnestly desire to show mercy and receive it; and breathing forgiveness, to resign your spirit into the hand of a merciful God. Does the hope of forgiveness from God, or the certainty of many days in the world, authorize you in the meantime, to prolong your contention, and to cherish a disposition which neither relents nor forgives? Allow me, brethren, to make one solemn appeal to your consciences and affections. You are fast advancing to the termination of your earthly course; you must answer to Christ, and surely you are desirous of being found in the company of the righteous, deemed at his glorious appearance. For your own sakes, then, for the sake of religion, for Christ's sake, return into the unity of the spirit, and love like brethren: And, thus, you will possess consolation in life, and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.

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